

BABY BARRYMORE

by
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Sobol

The newest member of the theater's Royal Family is no shrinking geranium. "They must think I'm good,"

crowds the Great Profile's cocky daughter, "or they wouldn't make this fuss over me"

A BROWN-EYED young Social Registerite sat in the star's dressing-room in a New York theater one night not long ago, sinking her firm, irregular teeth into a big, red apple. When she had devoured it she smacked her lips and crisply announced, "That was swell!" Then, she wiped her long, artistic fingers on a rouge-smudged tissue, adjusted her nineteenth-century bonnet—and flounced out gaily and even defiantly to meet her first Broadway First Night audience.

Unknowingly, nineteen-year-old Diana Blythe Barrymore had shattered a quaint family tradition which decreed that in the theatrical debut of a Barrymore or a Drew an apple must be rubbed just before the jittery trek from wing to stage. Originated in the last century by Diana's great-grandmamma, Mrs. John Drew, it had been passed on to the Barrymores when Georgia Drew married Granddaddy Maurice Barrymore. This was the impulsive lady, who, between plays, produced those talented erratics, Diana's Uncle Lionel, Aunt Ethel, and Daddy John Barrymore.

It was John, the Great Profile himself, who had sent the apple, with a paternal note, which read: "All my love, Baby. Wish I could be there. Daddy."

The play was a stilted three-acter labeled *The Romantic Mr. Dickens*, and Diana did not appear until nearly the end of the second act. Her first words, "But—I *must* see him," lured applause, loud and prolonged. When the final cur-

BABY BARRYMORE

~father & child (1921)



tain fell, those first-nighters realized that another Barrymore had gone to town with a vengeance. The critics marshaled such adjectives as “vibrant,” “vivid,” “beautiful,” and “confident” to describe the “best Barrymore debut in years.”

Diana was grateful, even jubilant, but her only comment was, “I knew they’d like me. I gave it *everything*.”

The Romantic Mr. Dickens died of pernicious anemia six nights later, but, in Broadway parlance, Diana was in. The latest member of the amazing Barrymore clan—the Crown Princess of the theater’s Royal Family—sat back to receive the homage due her. She didn’t have to wait long. There were bids from two stage producers and invitations from Hollywood to play opposite Spencer Tracy in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (once a starring vehicle for Daddy John) and share billing with Cary Grant in another picture.

“They must think I’m good or they wouldn’t make this fuss over me,” concluded Diana, who is no shrinking geranium. Cocksure of her birthright, she accepted the star on her dressing-room door that first night as symbolic of her theatrical prerogatives.

Few girls have popped into the lime-light so depressingly handicapped. Diana was born in New York in 1921, of two personalities so diversely and unconventionally talented that it’s a wonder she managed to grow up at all. Father

BABY BARRYMORE

John once showed promise of becoming one of the nation's foremost illustrators and cartoonists. Her mother, the former Blanche Oelrichs, who preferred to be known as Michael Strange, was a successful poet, author, and playwright. Diana bears a strange assortment of gifts from each of them.

When she was seven, her parents were divorced, and she didn't see the Magnificent Profile again until she was twelve—and, thereafter, only on rare occasions until 1939. Then, one midnight about a year ago, she suddenly determined to save her susceptible papa from his fourth wife, Elaine Barrie.

After the New York première of *My Dear Children*, in which he was starring, Diana lured him to one of Manhattan's swanky night clubs. Elaine followed in hot pursuit. While father and daughter rumbaed, Elaine leaped for Diana's empty chair—and there she sat, waiting for her man. Returning to the table, Diana pointed to her father's bride and announced, "Either that woman leaves or I leave!"

Diana left.

Before her formal education terminated abruptly, five years ago, Diana had studied Latin, French, social deportment, English rhetoric, and fudge-making in a dozen different finishing schools. At one of these institutions Diana decided that before she became a great actress, she would first pay tribute to her mother by becoming a great writer. Fourteen years old, she turned out a novelette, in which the hero, finding his wife unfaithful—as well as in a slightly dying condition—decided to let her die. The doctor had ordered that all her windows must be closed tightly—or else! So the ingenious husband entered the room, locking the door behind him. To his gasping wife he muttered, "So—it had to be another man—you, who promised to love me forever and a day." Then, "coldly, grimly, and deliberately," he walked to the window—and drew it up. The "icy breath of winter blew in." Finis!

This touching bit of literature promptly won the school prize. Encouraged, Diana wrote another, adopting the *nom de plume* of "Shirin Galsworthy." She had just penned the tragic conclusion when impulsive John decided to become acquainted with his daughter. Word had reached him that she had shown an alarming indifference to her studies. In a flash of paternal concern, he dispatched a letter of rebuke. Back came Diana's reply:

"I don't know where you got the idea

BABY BARRYMORE

I wasn't doing well in my studies. I have been doing very (Continued on page 67) well, except in Egyptology. I haven't done well there because I don't like those funny Egyptian figures. In fact, I am very sick of people who go through life in profile."

Oblivious of the hint, John reached for the long-distance telephone and invited her to join him on a Southern cruise. "Bring along whomever you wish," he urged graciously. Whereupon Diana asked her mamma, who said "No." But Stepfather Harrison Tweed accepted with alacrity—and so did several others. It was a rare voyage.

Aboard that Barrymore yacht, the *Infanta*, besides the master, were Diana, her mother's third husband, her mother's son by her first husband, a nice young actor named Tyrone Power, and Elaine Barrie. During this cruise, Daddy Barrymore's third wife, Dolores Costello, filed her suit for divorce.

"A pip of a trip," recalls Diana. "Daddy and Harry (father and stepfather) kept trying to outfish each other. . . . Me? I flirted with Tyrone Power, but no go. I wasn't his type."

SHORTLY after, Barrymore sold the yacht. He set aside the money received as a trust fund for Diana. To date she hasn't received a penny, but her stepfather is a generous parent, and so is her mother. She doesn't have to count on the stage as her sole means of support.

Unlike Aunt Ethel, Diana did not attain her Broadway debut the hard way. Ethel Barrymore trudged from manager's office to office for months and finally had to content herself with an understudy's role. Diana hit Broadway after a few months of dramatic training, a single brief season of leading roles in a Maine stock company, and a road tour as the ingénue in *Outward Bound*.

During this tour she happened to encounter her father in Chicago. Embracing her, with his best profile to the cameraman, he exclaimed, "Isn't she the grandest, most beautiful person you've ever seen? I give you my word, I worked like hell on *Hamlet* and *Richard the Third*, but this—this lovely girl here—say, she's the best thing I ever produced."

Diana may not be the brownest-eyed girl in town, but she'll do until one comes along. Her hair drips to her shoulders in glossy, dark brown curls, which, from more than two feet away, look jet-black. She is less than five and a half feet tall, but her long-limbed stride gives off the impression of a six-footer. When angry she has the Barrymore trait of seeming to grow inches taller.

There was an exhibition of this eerie gift when, on the final night of *The Romantic Mr. Dickens*, the producer entered her dressing-room to inform her that a certain actress was in the audience.

Diana shot right up to six feet. Her eyes machine-gunned sparks. Her nose thinned and sharpened. "I'll show that dame," she stormed. "I'll show her acting what's acting to put on 'a thin sweater,' and be sure

BABY BARRYMORE

to “wear shoes when you go out.”

Aunt Ethel didn't attend Diana's first opening night, possibly because she was too busy starring in a play of her own, *The Corn is Green*. As for Uncle Lionel—“poor darling”—Diana told me she had never laid eyes on him in her life, except in the movies. Come to think of it, she had never met her half brother and sister, Jack and Dolores Costello Barrymore, nor any of her father's later wives, except Elaine Barrie.

A bit on the plump side—129 pounds—Diana confesses an enthusiasm for food, especially raw meat and artichokes. “But let someone come along,” she insists, “and say, ‘Look here, I've got a good part for you, Camille. Take off twenty pounds.’ Mister, lay a bet on it, those twenty pounds will be off in a week—well, ten days, anyway.”

Listening to her, you believe her. Listening to Diana Barrymore, you will believe anything. And probably you'll be right. After all, those baffling Barrymores are capable of practically anything.

